Matthew 22:34-46 – Theme

Communion, Last after Trinity, 25h October 2026

Do you sometimes get annoyed by news interviews? On the radio, or on television. Quite often it is with the interviewee, who refuses to answer the questions. They will flannel, they will answer a different question completely, they will go off at a tangent for a long time hoping that the interviewer will forget what they asked. They will get cross in the hope that the interviewer will back off.

But sometimes, the problem is with the interviewer. When they are trying to get the person being interviewed to say something controversial. To give a 'yes' or 'no' answer to a complex question. To criticise someone in their own government, or a foreign leader, so that they can leap on the criticism as a headline.

When religion is raised, interviewers regularly jump to easy targets: Does God tell you what to do? What's your view on gays? What about extremists in your religion?

Jesus had problems like this. Of course he was not being interviewed for the 10 o'clock news. But people did come up and ask him questions, theatrically, in front of the crowds.

Just a little earlier than our gospel reading in Matthew 23, the Jewish leaders had tried to catch out Jesus with a question about tax to the Roman emperor. If he had said that people should not pay tax, then he would be in trouble with the Romans. But if he said people should pay tax, well, that's never popular. And he would seem to be siding with the Roman occupying power, against Jewish loyalties to God. He could not win, they thought. It is such a journalistic sort of question.

What Jesus actually did was to take a coin, and ask them whose image was on it. "Caesar's", they said. "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." It's brilliant. It is not only a clever put-down, but it still stresses the need to obey and serve God.

Immediately before our reading in Matthew (22:15-22), another group of Jewish leaders, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, had been testing Jesus with a question about who a woman would be married to in the afterlife if she had married seven brothers in turn. Jesus tells them that they are wrong, and that neither understand the scriptures nor the power of God. He shows from scripture that there is resurrection.

Following Jesus' silencing of the Sadducees, another group, the Pharisees, came to try their hand at questioning Jesus. "Which is the greatest commandment?"

This does not immediately appear to be a trick question. Perhaps they were hoping to follow up with a killer question.

There were, traditionally, 613 commandments in the law, the 'Torah'. Far too many to remember and consider all the time. Jesus answers with two quotations:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ (Deuteronomy 6:5, but Jesus says ‘mind’, whereas the original says ‘might’). And ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18).

He actually takes the question seriously, and gives a thoughtful, all-encompassing answer. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”. It is all about loving God, and loving your neighbour as yourself. And, though they are technically ‘commandments’, they are rather more general principles rather than detailed instructions.

I had a passage about the pharisees arguing with Jesus for a sermon a few months ago. There was an ongoing tussle between Jesus and the religious leaders. Jesus could be very critical of them, and very direct. He challenged their hypocrisy (23:15), their rejection of him (21:33-46), and the way they place burdens on the common people (23:4). He tells parables against them (21:33-45) and calls them white-washed tombs (23:17), viper’s broods (12:34), and suchlike.

This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But he was not like this with everyone. There is a prophecy in the book of Isaiah, one of the Servant Songs that is commonly taken as being about Jesus, which says ‘a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench’ (Isaiah 42:3). It is a good description. He was not a bullying presence, pressuring people into following him. For those who were in pain or need, he was gentle. But he could be strong when needed. And he expected high standards from those who were leaders. If you are telling other people what to do, your need to set an example. (Which is tough for preachers.)

Rather than letting the Pharisees come back at him, Jesus asks them a question: “Whose son is the Messiah.” It was generally accepted that he would be a human descendant of King David, and the Pharisees answer, “The Son of David). But the, says Jesus, how comes David calls the Messiah ‘Lord’? (in Psalm 110). No-one calls their son ‘Lord’. So who is he? Jesus does not provide the answer (though he is both a descendant of David and the Messiah), but this floors the Pharisees, who do not know how to respond. He succeeds in stopping the trick questions, apparently from that time on.

It is noticeable how Jesus turns conversations, questions, to what is important. It is not just chat, it is not just trying not to put his foot in it. He challenges people to think, to consider things that are deep, to change.

As usual, I believe we should follow his example. Think how you can help people to see past the day-to-day. Even when people are challenging you, trying to make you trip up, consider where God would want to take the discussion.

And in all, love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.

Jeremy Thake
St. John & St. Stephens.

Matthew 22

The Greatest Commandment

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' 37 He said to him, '"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

The Question about David's Son

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' 43 He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

44 "The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"?

45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' 46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.